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James, Liz. Light and Color in Byzantine Art

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James' title coupled with the generous number of color illustrations in her text led me to assume that she would survey Byzantine art in more traditional terms of light and color. Instead, the book pursues the perceptual repercussions of color in Byzantine art and is based on James' dissertation, "Colour Perception in Byzantium" (University of London, 1989). In the first chapter, James describes her goals:

The issue of the perception of colour is the theme that will dominate the remainder of this book. Rather than simply 'what do we see in looking at Byzantine art?', I will rephrase the question as 'what is there to see in looking at Byzantine art?' Is there a difference between our perceptions of something so obvious as colour and Byzantine perceptions? To assess this, I will look at colour vocabulary, the actual words used to describe colours by the Byzantines, and the use of such words. Do the Byzantines describe colours in the same sort of ways as we do? What does this use of colour vocabulary say about Byzantine perceptions -- and about our perceptions? In answering such questions, I shall discuss Byzantine writings about art and concentrate on one image in particular, the rainbow, an image whose colours are so familiar to us as to need no discussion. I shall examine Byzantine theories of vision and the workings of vision to see how these affect Byzantine beliefs about the nature of colour and I shall conclude with a study of how Byzantine ideas about colour influenced their ideas about the nature of pictorial representation itself. (p. 13)

The importance of Byzantine literary evidence in this ambitious project is also acknowledged as James will,

juxtapose both works of art and texts from different periods. In this way, it will become clear that while some attitudes to colour remained constant, others were flexible and shifted. I have been more concerned to consider shifts in colour use in terms of the subject-matter of the particular image than questions of how exactly attitudes to colour changed over time: there is not sufficient evidence to trace this last issue. By juxtaposing material from different centuries, both continuity and change become apparent. (pp. 16-17)

Chapter 2 follows a few pages later and initiates an almost entirely tangential discussion concerning technical issues related to the materials of color. While a number of the points made here are of interest, the chapter as a whole (with the exception of the alchemy discussion) constitutes a distraction to what is otherwise a thoughtful and original approach to the perception of color in Byzantium. In my opinion, most of chapter 2 would have been more happily housed in an appendix. I would encourage readers to skip it entirely in their initial reading of James' text for chapter 3 clearly flows directly from chapter 1. Chapter 3 returns to the author's main concern, the Byzantines' perception of color. This chapter describes the Classical perception of color and begins with a glossary of fifteen Greek color words derived from Aristotle's and Plato's compilations of the major colors. James notes that the definitions in her glossary are imprecise in referring to single specific hues. The emphasis instead is placed on "contrast, especially between light and dark..." (p. 51). The importance of value or brightness is traced to both Plato's and Aristotle's theories of color and vision. James notes that:

Byzantine traditions of colour. . . are based on a foundation involving not the modern concern with hue, but the Classical ideas about the nature of vision, including emphasis on brightness and linear colour scale, on which colours are perceived as forming a continuum between black and white. (p. 68)

In chapter 4 a Byzantine glossary of color terms allows James to determine the degree of indebtedness of Byzantium to its Classical heritage (pp. 72-74). Numerous similarities between color vocabularies of the two traditions are noted. In both:

colour is conceived of as a combination of dark and light elements; a group of four primaries is proposed; colour is not defined extensively in terms of its hue, but with regard to both brilliance and saturation. (pp. 79-80)

And, more important, the function of colours is to distinguish things, that colour is an element in the definition of being. (p. 80)

James' survey of Byzantine literature points out how rarely color words actually occur regardless of the period or literary genre. "All Byzantine authors. . . use more words reflecting brilliance and qualities of light than they do 'colour' words: this suggests a perceptual difference between 'them' and 'us'. (p. 79)

The second half of the chapter is devoted to a fine case study in which she compares and contrasts the perception of color in Michael Psellos' *Chronographia* of the eleventh century with that revealed in the epic poem, *Digenes Akrites*. She concludes that while there are some differences in their color vocabularly (the actual words used), that they are surprisingly similar in their perception of color. Both "use colour sparingly, and both emphasize value above hue. In both texts, this is achieved through detailing qualities of light- bearing, of glitter, gleam, and reflection" (p. 90).

One major departure from the Classical use of color is observed. In the Classical world women are fair and men are dark. In Psellos' text and the epic poem, both virtuous men and women are white, and outsiders (especially Ethiopians) are dark, suggesting a new standard of beauty in the Byzantine worldo (pp. 82 and 87).

Chapter 5 delves further into the role of color in Byzantium, particularly with regard to color symbolism, by studying depictions of the rainbow. Two types of rainbows are isolated. Naturalistic rainbows are typically found in scenes of Noah's ark and appear to represent God's covenant. Non-naturalistic rainbows are more likely to be found in representations of the Ascension, the Last Judgment, and Christ in Glory. Here the rainbow symbolizes a "manifestation of divine light reflecting the glory of Christ; the rainbows are seen particularly in holy visions..." (p. 99). Support for James' conclusions are found in sources ranging from the Bible to Pseudo-Dionysius, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus, and others. James concludes:

Where the rainbow is represented in a non-naturalistic way, the colours employed are significant of light and divinity. However, it is clear that context -- in this case the rainbow as a sign of divine glory -- is more important than the hue in defining the meaning. (p. 108)

Chapter 6 analyzes two rhetorical accounts of the no longer extant mosaics of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. One text is the tenth-century poem by Constantine Rhodios; the other dates from the late twelfth century and was written by Nicholas Mesarites. James reveals that the color vocabulary of both is basically Classical in that it is not so much hue that is significant, but rather relative lightness or darkness. The relative importance of context is underlined again here. "There is," she writes, "no organized colour 'symbolism'; rather the 'meaning' of the colour depends above all on the context in which it is used" (p. 123). This section also includes a discussion of ekphrasis and its impact on color vocabulary (pp. 117f). Ultimately, "Imagination was perceived by the Greeks as a form of seeing, and the ekphrasis was an obvious vehicle for its display. Colour is used in these pieces to convey this idea, as a means of enabling the imagination to perceive the object described, as a crucial element in turning listeners into spectators" (p. 123).

In her final chapter, James pursues the link between color and form, alluded to above (p. 80). Without color, the image remained a sketch. Physical color modeled the scene, "but the use of 'true' colours makes the nature of the figures clear, modelling them in the spiritual dimension" (p. 139). Moreover, links are made between color and writing. She notes that in the Seventh Ecumenical Council it was recorded that: "that which the narrative declares in writing is the same as that which the icon (or image) does [in colours]" (p. 130). Thus,

If colour is equated with the word, then it must be because, on whatever level, it is felt to carry out a similar function: both serve to define and transmit meaning. As words are the codes of speech and writing, the building blocks, so similarly colour is conceived as the code for art in Byzantium. (p. 131)

These points are made very effectively as the the author traces the impact of Christian authors on the Classical perception of color. The result is persuasively described as what James refers to as the Byzantine 'ideology' of color.

James' book constitutes a significant and original contribution concerning the perception of color in Byzantium. No one who reads it will consider color in Byzantine art in traditional stylistic and iconographic perimeters again.

As an art historian, however, I find myself in the unlikely position of expressing some reservations about the rather luxurious packaging of James' text. Generally, scholarly art history texts are produced on meager budgets that result in a limited number of black and white illustrations. But, in this case, the important role of brilliance and gleam identified in James' analysis of the Byzantines' perception of color seems to have affected the overall design of this book, a product of Oxford University Press' prestigious Clarendon Press. I am referring here to the remarkable inclusion of 64 color plates, in a text, which as we have

seen, is far more interested in literary descriptions of Byzantine art than in the actual analysis of color and light in Byzantine artistic monuments per se. These color plates, while always welcome, are not fundamental to most of James' text. This can be demonstrated by the following statistics. The first forty-two color plates are only mentioned in the first twelve pages of text; in fact, the first eleven plates are only mentioned on page 1 of James' text. Moreover, while plates 43 - 57 are discussed on pp. 19- 34, there are no references to any color plates from pp. 35-91. That is, there are a total of seven plate references from p. 35 through the end of the text on p. 140. From this the reader can gather some notion of the relative importance of these color plates to James' discussion.

Thus, the tension alluded to at the beginning of this review between my expectations regarding James' text and its actual content is more pervasive than initially imagined. I do think that its title (the original dissertation title does seem to better convey the book's content), its extensive number of color illustrations, and its $125 price tag will color the perception of its text. James' book could have been marketed quite differently, and although the result would have been imbued with less "gleam," the significant reduction in price would have allowed it to reach a larger audience.

While I have alluded to certain problems with this book (most of which seem to reflect peculiar choices by its publisher), I do not wish to undermine its importance. James' text ought to be read by Byzantine art historians, as well as by anyone interested in the theory of color and its perception.